

CONDUCT OF MEETINGS

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE LIBRARY BOARD MEETINGS

(Adapted from the 1993 *Connecticut Public Library Trustees Handbook*)

1. **The chairperson calls the meeting to order—on time!** A library board meeting starts on time and ends on time. A board meeting is a business meeting that should be conducted in a businesslike manner, following bylaws and parliamentary rules.
2. **Take attendance.** Note in the minutes those present or absent. The attendance record is important proof that your meeting had a quorum to conduct official business. Note in the minutes late arrivals as well as members that may leave early.
3. **Recognize guests and visitors representing organizations.** Introduce non-board guests—such as staff members, reporters, representatives of other libraries, government officials, etc.
4. **Approve the agenda.** The agenda is prepared by the chair and the library director and distributed prior to the meeting along with draft minutes and the financial report. The agenda is the plan for the meeting and must be formally accepted.

Although board members should feel free to place items on the agenda, last minute requests should be discouraged. Last minute agenda changes often produce poor discussion, and preclude opportunity for the public to comment. If the item must be considered before the next meeting, the minutes should reflect the reasons for a last minute addition to the agenda.

5. **Approve minutes of the last meeting.** Minutes are the official record of board actions. Send minutes out before the meeting so members can scrutinize them carefully. Correct errors before the board approves the minutes.
6. **Hear the financial report, approve bills.** The written financial report documents the monthly and year-to-date status of library revenues and expenditures. Changes should be highlighted verbally. Washington State law allows boards to pass a resolution allowing staff to pay bills and report at the next meeting. Bills are then usually listed by voucher number, payee, purpose, and amount and are approved in a single motion. The library director should point out unusual bills. Queries about specific bills that do not need to be considered by the entire board should be directed to the library director prior to or after the board meeting. This is not the time to begin a discussion about where to find new revenues.
7. **Hear the library director's report.** The library director's report should be for information purposes only. Issues the library director wishes the board to act on will be addressed in the "New Business" portion of the agenda.
8. **Hear committee reports.** Committees which work for the library board are expected to provide a status report about their activities. Written reports, mailed in advance, should be prepared if the reports are long or complicated. Discussion of action items will be taken under unfinished or new business. The library director will also be an active participant providing background on issues and making recommendations.

9. **Consider unfinished business.** There should be few items of “unfinished Business,” such as motions tabled or actions interrupted by adjournment and intentionally carried over for discussion or action at the current meeting. Don’t allow “unfinished business” to be a catchall.

10. **Consider new business.** This is the time to consider new business motions in response to board member, committee and library director requests. Boards will often aim to achieve consensus decisions, but official business must have a motion and the minutes will reflect the vote. Once the board has officially voted, members must set aside personal feelings and support the stance of the board.

The new business agenda may include time for continuing education on topics selected by the board.

11. **Listen to audience.** The board may use sign-in cards that identify the name of the person and the topic they wish to address. Set guidelines for public participation and distribute copies of the guidelines. Make it clear that constituents can speak during the “open session” or the chair may use discretion to call upon a person while the board conducts official business. Establish time limits and determine if a person may speak more than once. Make it clear that the board is not obligated to make a decision without further investigation. Also make it clear that the board is not obligated to discuss all topics during a future meeting.

12. **Make announcements.** Announce future board meetings, activities, who will represent the board at community or governmental events or meetings, participation in library association activities, etc.

13. **Evaluate the meeting.** Consider what was successful as well as what changes might be implemented to improve meetings.

14. **Adjourn the meeting—on time!** If the meeting needs to be extended beyond the time for adjournment, the board should vote on a motion to extend. No further business may take place after adjourning.

Establishing the Agenda for “New Business”

The board should require information to be available before a topic is put on the agenda so members can be fully prepared for discussion and decision-making. Information should include:

- Description of the issue.
- Decisions that will need to be made.
- Related previous decisions.
- Options, including discussion of the pros and cons of each.
- Budget and/or staff impacts.
- Recommendations.

Role of the Library Director in Board Meetings

The director attends all board meetings, and usually is asked by the board chair to participate in executive sessions.

The library director is responsible for all operations of the library. In order to support the board, the director provides information, research, proposes options, drafts policies or makes other recommendations for board consideration. The director supplies staff work, coordinates major efforts such as a long-range planning process, raises questions, describes programs, and assesses both the successes and failures of the library program. The director may provide or arrange for continuing education for trustees.

In Chapter 2, the chart, *Roles of a Library Board and the Library Director* details the complementary roles of trustees and the director.

Meeting Practices to Avoid

Long, arduous, and contentious meetings quickly undermine enthusiasm for the trustee job. It is the role of the chair to facilitate the conduct of the meeting to assure that a topic is discussed thoroughly. It is equally important not to dwell on unimportant topics.

Trustees should analyze the art of conducting efficient and effective meetings. Many books and Websites speak to the techniques for successfully facilitating meetings and negotiating issues. It will be helpful to devote some continuing education time to study and apply those techniques to the conduct of board meetings. Also, refer to the article on page 6.5 that addresses being prepared for public meetings on “hot” issues.

A board meeting that wanders from the agenda topic to peripheral discussions with little or no action soon becomes an exercise in wasted time and frustration. An equally important practice to avoid is hurrying through the agenda without allowing for full discussion.

Be sure that executive sessions are called only when the provisions of the Open Public Meetings laws are met. (See Chapter 10.)

Trustee Conflict of Interest

Washington law establishes that a trustee may not use their position to obtain financial or other gain for the private benefit of the trustee or for the trustee’s immediate family, or for an organization with which the trustee is associated.

The board should adopt a conflict of interest policy. It should quote Washington state law and then note that if a conflict of interest situation occurs a trustee will be expected to voluntarily abstain from discussion or voting on these issues. If any other member of the board perceives a possible conflict of interest for another trustee, the possible conflict should be pointed out and the board as a whole should decide whether the issue represents a conflict of interest.

Some instances when trustee conflict of interest may occur include:

- Selecting a bank.
- Contracting for insurance coverage.
- Purchasing capital equipment.
- Contracting for professional services such as attorneys, consultants, printing, etc.
- Purchasing office and other supplies.

Who Speaks for the Board?

When the board has voted to adopt a motion, all members must support that decision regardless of personal feelings. Board members should never question the wisdom of the decision when speaking to staff, to the media, or to the public, as well as attempt to revisit the decision at board meetings before time and experience indicates a need for review.

The board chair is usually the spokesperson for the board. Media questions are normally referred to the chair.

Handling Conflict Within the Board

As in other relationships, small misunderstandings and conflicts can sometimes develop into serious discord. If not dealt with effectively, a small misunderstanding can eventually interfere with the ability of the board to work together for the good of the library. Following are some suggestions for defusing potentially disruptive situations.

Board Chair Should Take the Lead in Solving Conflicts

If the conflict appears to be a personal one between two members, the chair can encourage the members to resolve the issue outside of a board meeting. If the conflict has divided the board into factions, the issues should be addressed at a full board meeting.

If a significant conflict occurs among board members, the board chair is the appropriate person to handle the situation, in an impartial manner. If the board chair is unwilling or unable to address the issues, the vice-chair may fill the role, if he or she is perceived as impartial by all parties. When this leadership is not available or the issue has achieved a level of tension that it cannot be successfully solved within the board itself, the board should consider using an outside facilitator or mediator.

Conflict Between the Board and Library Director

If a significant conflict occurs between the board and the library director, an external facilitator should be called in to assist in its resolution. Neither the board chair nor the library director are, or are perceived to be, impartial in these situations.

Identifying the Issues

To ensure that the issues are clearly identified and are addressed at the appropriate level, the board or board chair can ask and answer the following questions:

- Does the conflict revolve around "content" or around "personal styles"?
- Is there a philosophical difference or a difference of opinion on how to proceed in actions and/or details?
- Is this conflict a result of a difference in expectations?

Addressing the Conflict Issues

One way for a board chair to approach conflict among board members is:

- Ask every member to express their opinion about the issue. Ask them to share how they define the issues, how they feel about it, and the options that they see for resolution. Allow them to speak until they have finished—no comments, denials, defenses, questions, or refutations. Record the points on a flip chart for all to see.

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- During this entire process keep the conversation centered on the issue or behavior, not on the person.
 - After all members have expressed their opinions and feelings, ask the board as a whole to identify the central issues of the conflict as recorded on the flip chart.
 - Once the central issues are agreed upon, ask the board to brainstorm potential solutions. Again, ask each member to list their potential solution(s) without comments or discussion by other members. If necessary, ask each member what they need to have happen in order to feel that the issue is adequately resolved. Review with the board whether one or more of the potential solutions meet those requirements.
 - After discussion among all members, guide the discussion to one solution, or a combination of solutions, that seems to meet the requirements of the members.

If solutions cannot be identified or agreed upon, suggest that the board request assistance from an outside facilitator, consultant, or mediator.

(Some of the principles and concepts outlined here have been adapted from "*Resolving Conflict in Nonprofit Organizations: the leaders guide to finding constructive solutions*" 1999 by Marion Peters Angelica.)

HANDLING CONFLICT RESOLUTION OF COMMUNITY ISSUES

**Contributed by: Sharon Hammer, Director
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Library boards should not be surprised by, nor should they be afraid of, conflict. Conflict most frequently comes over challenges to the book collection, the Internet, or children's access to library materials.

There are specific ways to prepare for such incidents, but the most important advice in successfully dealing with controversy is to be prepared for it ahead of time. How do you prepare for controversy? Here are some of the ways:

Have a Clear Collection Policy in Place

Generally, the collection policy is developed by staff and the board policy committee. The policy needs to state the underlying principles as well as the reasons why these principles are important to the local community. The American Library Association *Freedom to Read* statement should be referenced and affirmed.

The library board should not accept responsibility for enforcing the diverse values of families living in the library community. The policy ought to clearly state that the parents and guardians are responsible for the reading, listening, and viewing choices of their minor children. If possible, this should be printed on every library card so patrons who are parents are made aware up front of library policy.

The policy, and any subsequent revisions, should be debated by the board at a regular or special meeting with the announced agenda of discussing the draft policy. Public input must be taken and carefully considered. Once a policy has been adopted, or revised, all board members must stand behind it regardless of their personal feelings.

Assure that a Complaint Procedure is Established in the Library

In addition to having the policy documents available in every branch, the board must be assured that the library director has established a method for dealing with citizen complaints that includes a review and response to the complainant at the staff level. If a citizen comes directly to the board with a complaint, and has not submitted their complaint following the established procedure, the board should refer the complaint to staff for review prior to board consideration.

Reach Out to the Community

There will be people who find the library collection, Internet, and certain other policies truly objectionable. They will not want their tax dollars to pay for these materials, services, etc. There will also be people who understand and support the role of the public library in a diverse community.

Every challenge, especially those that become uncomfortably public, is an opportunity to educate all those people in the middle of the spectrum who generally support the library, but think the arguments against it make a lot of sense—because on the surface the arguments often are persuasive.

The library board's job is to provide a public forum or some mechanism to let both sides explain their views. In presenting the library side, it is essential that there be both the legal and pragmatic view(s) presented so the full implications are clearly stated.

Frame the Issue

The issues must be framed in terms that describe the role of the public library in a free society. Most often citizens do not think of the library as a government agency. They do not think of the Constitution's First Amendment as protecting the public from government's infringement on their rights. Issues to be stressed are:

- The library is a public forum that must serve the needs of all community members, not just those who are offended by specific materials.
- Private enterprises, such as local grocery stores, may cover magazines because they are not a government agency.
- The courts have held that libraries may not filter all Internet terminals because it is considered prior restraint.
- Parents may censor their children but government agencies, such as the library, may not.
- Libraries support parental rights to set and enforce their own family values.
- What one family finds offensive another may find educational or deal with it in their own way without governmental interference.

Trust You Will Find Public Support

There will be public support for libraries and intellectual freedom. The local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union is one obvious place to start. But, there will be other people who support the library as well. Give these people an opportunity to speak out in favor of the library by letting them know when and where their help is needed.

Suggestions for Holding Successful Public Forums on Library Issues

A public forum on a controversial issue will educate many people and it will gain support for the public library just because the library board was not afraid to address the issue. In addition, consider using the public forum format for non-controversial issues, so the library is seen in the community as a major player in public education.

Consider adopting the following steps to achieve a successful forum regardless of whether the topic is controversial or not.

Target a Specific Issue

Frame a specific issue for discussion. Hold the discussion to that topic. Advertise the topic and time of meeting in the same manner as any library program or board meeting.

Select a Panel of Well-informed Speakers

A panel presenting both sides of the issue may be used. Be sure to ask reasonable panelists who will not appeal only to emotions.

Set the Rules Before the Meeting

Set the rules ahead of time. For example, determine the time limits for each speaker, and establish that no repeat questions or statements will be allowed before everyone has had their say (repeat statements do not even need to be granted). Have a timekeeper who gives 30 second warnings and then notifies the speaker when time is over. Pro and con statements should be alternated. Be sure the moderator understands that these rules are to be strictly and fairly enforced. The League of Women Voters often will provide trained timekeepers.

Employ a Skilled Moderator

Have a strong moderator who can keep control of heated discussions with good humor. The moderator should make it clear that the board will carefully consider all comments, but decisions will be made in future board meetings, not at the forum.

Have Speakers Sign in for Pro and Con Statements

Ask speakers to sign in on note cards stating if they will be giving a pro or con viewpoint, and a succinct abstract of their comments. Have someone sort these for the moderator, so the pro and con sides can be called upon in turn. This is especially important during the first part of the forum if there are media persons there who are on a deadline.

Be sure that persons who will speak to the public libraries' role will be there and are willing to speak.

Take Advantage of the Experience of Other Boards

In 1993, Fort Vancouver Regional Library had an eight-month heated controversy over the purchase of the book, "Sex" by Madonna. This book had 40 pre-purchase reserves on file with the library and was on the *New York Times* and other mainstream best seller lists. It met the requirements of the collection policy.

A forum on children's access was held. All the suggestions were recorded and reviewed by the Policy Committee of the Board. As a result, the Board reaffirmed the Collection Policy and approved a revised Children's Access Policy. The Board also reaffirmed its policy that parents and guardians are responsible for their own children's reading, viewing, and listening choices.

A videotape entitled *Libraries Under Fire, a Case Study* was produced with funding from the Library Services and Construction Act. It includes portions of the actual board meetings, vividly illustrating the speakers' emotions that erupted in these public meetings. It also discusses the process that the board followed as it dealt with the controversy.

Both the video and the Children's Access Policy are available from:
Fort Vancouver Regional Library District
1007 E. Mill Plain Blvd.
Vancouver, WA 98663

Conclusion

What once was a rather uncommon occurrence that seldom reached board level is becoming more commonplace. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "The only thing to fear is fear itself." Don't let the fear of handling unpleasant conflict keep you from the opportunity to educate the community about the role of the public library in a democratic society.